

NICHOLAS RAY: THE LAST MOVIES

Nicholas Ray, whose last 'Hollywood' film, *55 Days at Peking*, was made in 1962, died of cancer, aged 67, in New York City in June 1979. The full story of his last seventeen years and particularly the turmoil surrounding his final film projects has yet to be told. We print below two interim, frontline reports. Tom Farrell, one of Ray's former students and a subsequent collaborator, writes about the circumstances of *We Can't Go Home Again*, Ray's 'unfinished' work-in-progress, and *Lightning Over Water* (first subtitled *Nick's Film*), Wim Wenders' controversial homage to and collaboration with the dying Ray. Jon Jost, the independent American film-maker involved in the pre-production of the latter film, offers a contrary viewpoint. Richard Combs reviews the British release version of *Lightning Over Water* (reworked by Wenders after a hostile reception at Cannes) which is due to open in London shortly.

WE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Tom Farrell

What happened to Nicholas Ray after *They Live By Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Bigger Than Life*? In September 1971, he began to collaborate on a film project with his students at Harpur College, New York State. Ray took a working print of the film—his obsession—to the 1973 Cannes Festival, where it was screened under the fitting title *We Can't Go Home Again*.

Following the pain and failure of *King of Kings* and *55 Days at Peking*, the Sam Bronston epics he shot in Spain, Ray vowed never again to make a film he despised. He also feared he would never get another chance. Rumours of illness persisted. Nick went into exile on the Isle of Sylt in the North Sea. For several years he collected paintings and experimented with multiple images. He was unable to get a film project off the ground.

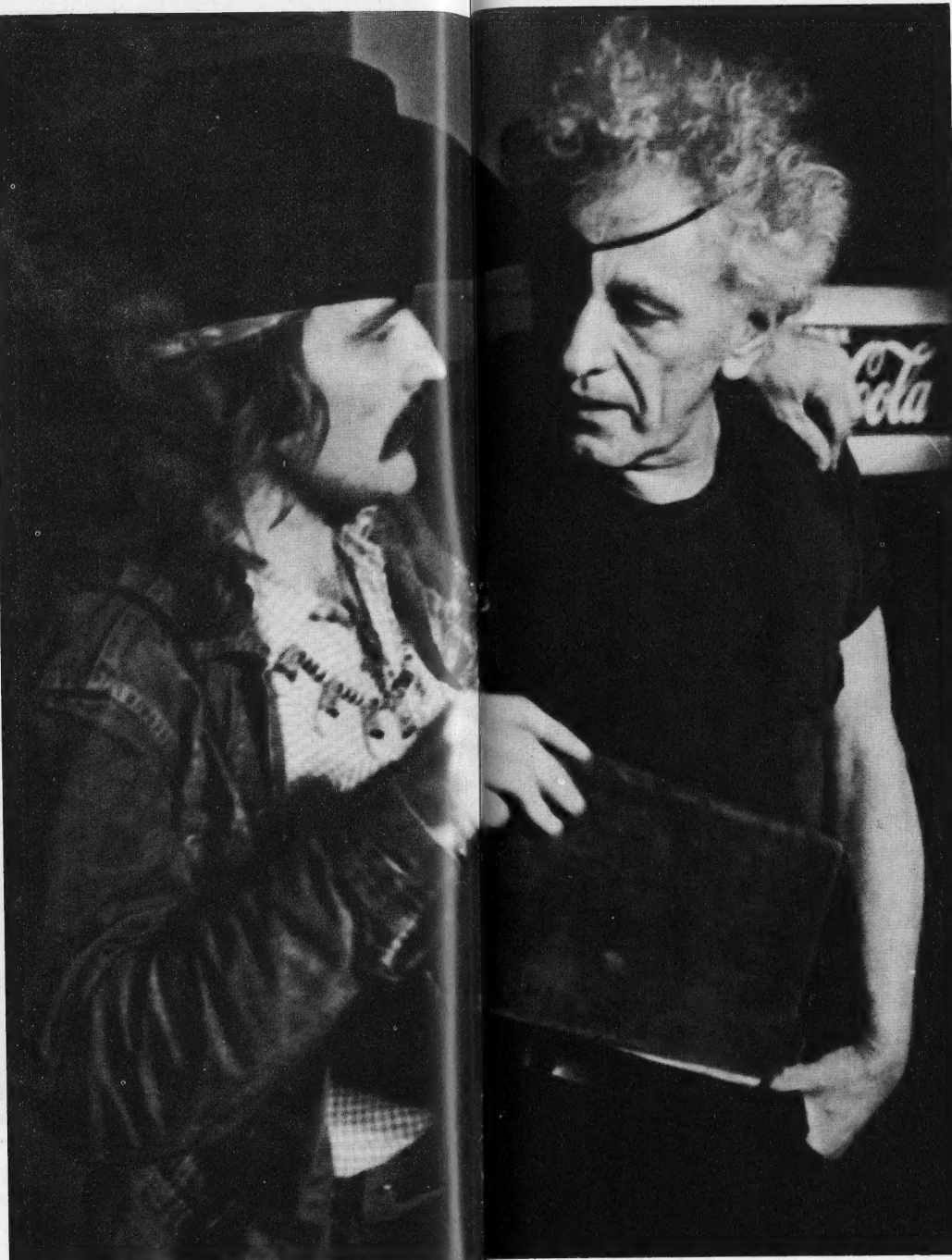
Ray returned to America in 1969 to film the Chicago Conspiracy Trial. Since cameras were not permitted in the courtroom, he filmed the defendants and their attorneys after court sessions in a nearby studio using the actual trial transcripts. The conspirators played themselves; Nick considered Groucho Marx for the role of Judge Hoffman. While battling with the financial difficulties of telling this political story without compromise,

Nick suffered an embolism which cost him the sight of his right eye. 'The trial was a circus of bigotry,' he recalled years later. The abortive film project marked another bitter defeat.

In May 1971, Ray gave a lecture at Harpur College at Binghamton. His shock of white hair was offset by a black eyepatch, black Levis, black turtleneck and black cowboy boots. He arrived on campus immediately after the May Day demonstrations in Washington, D.C., where some 7,000 students from across the country had been arrested for civil disobedience. Although invited to speak about his films, Nick staged a 'scene' with the students, using all the cameras, tape-recorders and lights of the Cinema Department. He called on anyone recently returned from Washington to describe what had happened. I volunteered how, on my twenty-first birthday, I had been clubbed and Maced. Nick noted that sharing this experience was a lesson in acting.

We stayed up all night talking. The success of the lecture resulted in the offer, and ready acceptance, of a two-year contract as a visiting professor of cinema. Ray did not believe that film-making could be taught as an academic course. It had to be experienced. He combined his three classes into a production crew of forty-five students, who would train to be actors, writers, camera operators, sound recordists, editors, script clerks, gaffers, grips and assistant directors. Everyone had to be involved, and every two weeks the crew members would rotate roles. Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* and Bergson's *Essay on Laughter* were required reading. It is difficult to distinguish the film from the conditions in which it was made. Nick expected a total commitment from everyone. Filming without a script, the crew worked mostly through the nights since students had other classes during the day. Jokingly, we called ourselves 'creatures of the night'.

The film was financed from Ray's own salary and from a State arts grant. He wrote a preliminary script called *The*



Hopper (left) and Ray at Harpur, September

Gun Under My Pillow, with the following preface: 'It is intended that this film be a happening. The purpose in making the film is to give the students a wide variety of experience in the mechanics, techniques and art of film-making. It is also intended to tell an intensely personal story of a man harassed by one or more premonitions, and equally determined to overcome the negativism, even at the cost of his life, which is, of course, what the premonition is all about.'

The first scene took place at night outside the college infirmary. Two men in white uniforms pound on the door. Nick, surprised, opens it from inside. He sees panic in their faces as they announce that someone has been hit by a car. He tells them to bang on the other door. They do. A nurse answers. They repeat the announcement. Perturbed, she tells them that the accident has been reported. She slams the door in their faces. The men run away when a hearse speeds into the driveway. Nick peeps in the window of the vehicle and then walks

1971. Photograph: Charles Levi.

back to the infirmary, shutting the door behind him.

Dennis Hopper was invited by Nick to Harpur to show his new film *The Last Movie*, but because of disastrous reviews in New York the releasing company cancelled the screening. Hopper told a wild audience that Nick Ray had given him his first significant part, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and announced that his mentor was *persona non grata* in today's Hollywood: 'He can't even get a job directing a film.' Ray bristled, asserting his refusal to make deals instead of films. Then a student yelled, 'Do something from *Easy Rider*,' to which Hopper replied, 'My image is a fake, right?' He pointed to his cowboy hat and rugged road clothes.

Inspired by this visit, Nick set up a scene with the students brutally interrogating him. 'What are you doing here?' 'Aren't you too old to teach us cinema?' Nick improvised with the group through provocation: 'You are all guilty of conspiracy' and 'Who will be my Judas?' His

interaction with the students became a mutual need for companionship. He was more than a teacher; he was a father confessor. We were more than students; we were his children. Recognising this, Nick changed the title of our work in progress to *We Can't Go Home Again*. The phrase summed up our loss of direction. Thomas Wolfe was right. Home had ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory. Nick was remaking *Rebel Without a Cause* for the post-war generation that woke up in 1968. The latent rebellion of the 50s climaxed in the late 60s. When the Beatles broke up we felt the world was coming to an end. Nick thought this would be his last film, and he wanted to tell everything he had learned. Some students paid attention to him, but many more dropped out of sight. A few grew to love him.

We Can't Go Home Again had no plot, just a central character named Nick, as fascinating as he was paranoid. He was a stranger who seemed to identify with young people, and I could not restrain the impression that Nick was grappling with a delayed rebellion of his own. Gradually, the film focused on the search for self image. Who am I? What am I? Why am I? The film was about the withdrawal from conflict in the streets to face the conflict within ourselves, and Nick's self-portrait in it is rooted in the gifted, neurotic characters from the films he had directed earlier: Bogart playing in *In a Lonely Place*, James Mason in *Bigger Than Life*, Richard Burton in *Bitter Victory*, Robert Ryan in *On Dangerous Ground*. He is the catalyst surrounded by impressionable students, who seek a sense of direction which he is unable to give. 'Every man is a father to every child,' says a character in *55 Days at Peking*, Ray's last 'Hollywood' film, in which he also appears briefly as an American ambassador confined to a wheelchair. Nick is the most tormented character in all his films, a man 'with a crucifixion in his face', as Melville described Ahab. He assumed the guilt of his generation, deeming it 'more guilty of betrayal than any in history.'

During Nick's two years at Harpur, the college was shaken by hysteria: Vietnam War protests, a memorial birthday party for Adolf Hitler, the Attica Prison riot, an orgy the night Nixon was re-elected, drug raids, police harassment, suicides. One night, after drinking in a bar, Nick drove home on back roads in darkness as though he was James Dean and crashed into a ditch. Miraculously, he was not injured. Another time, a student on LSD challenged him to a fist fight, which had to be stopped. After working all night, Nick often fell asleep over breakfast, face down in a plate of pancakes and eggs. At one time he was so strung out for money that he thought of shooting a porno film on the side.

Finally, Nick received an invitation to show our two years of work at the 1973 Cannes Festival. A crew of six travelled to Hollywood, the home of Nick's greatest achievements, to complete the editing and sound mixing. We put the whole film together out of chaos in the same bungalow at the Chateau Marmont where Nick

had stayed while making *Rebel Without a Cause*. Shot in 16mm, 35mm and Super-8, processed through a video colour synthesiser and transferred back to film, *We Can't Go Home Again* is a mosaic of multiple images. One image (usually on the lower left side of the screen), contained the central action of the scene, while the other three, four or sometimes five images provided supplementary impressions. We achieved this effect by running several projectors simultaneously, so that the images would appear on a large screen. They were then filmed as a composite 35mm picture.

In Hollywood, we were burnt out from exhaustion. During a tense moment when he feared failure, Nick almost withdrew the film from the festival. 'I love living dearly, but I'm involved in dying,' he cried. Eventually, he flew to Cannes with a new print in hand.

We Can't Go Home Again begins in 1968 at the bloody Chicago Democratic Convention. Nick narrates the ensuing trial, as the defendants, the Chicago Seven, meet on the screen. The film's title appears one word at a time over a frantic night drive down a highway: on the soundtrack Norman and Suzy Zamcheck sing a blues number—'Bless the family that loves together ... Bless the family that lives and dies together/ Bless the family that loves/Bring them some happiness/Shelter from loneliness.'

In one scene, Nick is antagonised by a student named Richie Bock. When asked why he was kicked out of his last college, Richie says he was involved with the Students for a Democratic Society. 'Are you getting out of the fight again?' Nick asks. 'I'm in one right now,' Richie replies. 'With yourself?' 'No, with you.' In another scene, Nick questioned a red-haired student named Danny Fisher: 'What made you think of growing a beard?' The answer, Charlton Heston as Moses.

Our leading lady complained to Nick of cramps, telling him how she deliberately contracted syphilis to obtain a prescription for penicillin. Nick directed a scene of her confession, with himself as her betrayer. When she cries for help, he feigns warmth, graciously escorting her to his director's chair on a red carpet. She reveals a quest for corruption in New York's East Village. Nick listens deceitfully to her whine: 'I could always be a flower, but I'm not. I'm always ugly.' At that devastating moment, Nick commands the students to throw tomatoes in her face. A massacre. She rushes forward close up to the camera screaming. Nick orchestrates the attack wearing two eyepatches.

Like all the characters in the film, she longed for affection. Another girl walks alone in the rain searching for someone. She visits a boy who is sleeping with his girl friend. Rejected, she confides to the camera: 'I don't want to go back home to my parents. They still think I'm a virgin. They want me to be a virgin. All over again.' I was an actor in the film. In one scene Nick tells me a Riddle of the Sphinx about a wise man (himself) who travels the world in search of a guiding truth. Eventually, he puts the question to the Sphinx. Whereupon, according to

Nick, 'For the first time in 5,000 years the Sphinx opened her mouth and said: Don't expect too much.'

I appeared in a scene shot at the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami. Disillusioned by America, I returned to Harpur resolved to shave off a year's untrimmed beard. Nick filmed the removal of my mask. I shook my fist at the stranger in the mirror. While the camera was rolling, Nick begged me to open up. 'Talk to me, Tom. Make me believe in you.' I looked at myself in the mirror and said: 'My name is Tom Farrell. I was born on 3 May 1950, in New York City. I studied to be a priest for five and a half years. My father is a homicide detective with the New York City police force. I love him. Don't call him a pig. He's a person who talked a lot of people out of committing suicide.'

In the film, the Nick character suffers two symbolic deaths. First, he is killed by a motorist while hitch-hiking dressed in a Santa Claus costume. The body of Saint Nick is wheeled away in a red wagon. Then, at the climax, I argue bitterly with Nick while running from a house to shelter in a barn. Nick climbs a ladder in the barn, fearing I will hang myself with the noose he has left there to use himself. While I hide, Richie accuses Nick of tempting me with the deliberately planted noose. The men swing and kick at each other from ropes hanging from the rafters. Trying to remove a rope, Nick accidentally hangs himself. As the body swings furiously back and forth, the voice of the professor leaves his students a legacy: 'Take care of each other. It's your only chance to survive. And let the rest of us swing.' Nick hangs at the end of his tether choking. 'I was interrupted.' That's how the film ended at Cannes.

In 1976, Nicholas Ray became friends with Wim Wenders, who gave him a role opposite Dennis Hopper in *The American Friend*. Nick succeeded in pulling himself together by joining Alcoholics Anonymous. He lived in a SoHo loft with Susan Schwartz, his devoted companion of many years. Milos Forman offered him the part of the irascible general in the movie of *Hair*. While teaching at the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute, Nick was stricken with cancer. He underwent surgery three times at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Center.

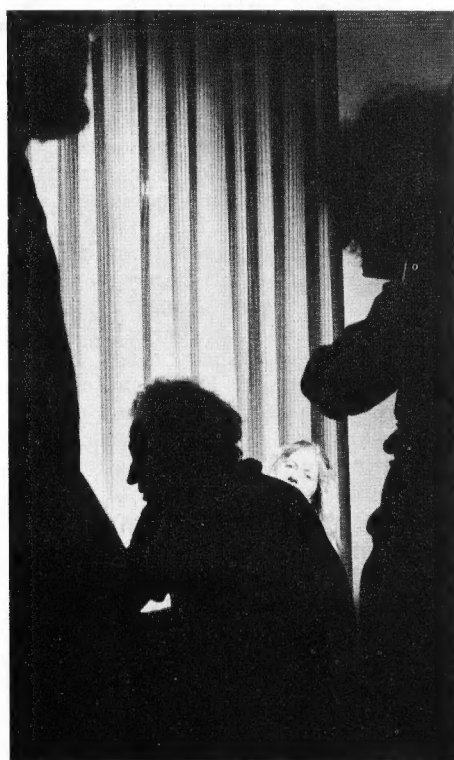
In 1979, Nick agreed to make a film with Wim Wenders about their friendship. Out of the blue a crew of Germans, Frenchmen and Americans were assembled to film a lecture Nick was to deliver at Vassar College in upstate New York. Wenders' Berlin company, Road Movies, financed the project, which was produced by Chris Sievernich and Pierre Cottrell. Ed Lachman operated camera. We started shooting on the road, as Nick was being chauffeured to the lecture in a limousine. At Vassar, Nick was introduced to the audience after a screening of *The Lusty Men*, whose theme, in 1952, he described as the American Dream of finding a home of one's own. When a young woman asked if he had any regrets about his career, Nick replied, 'Yes, I drank too much.' He looked frail but

serene, happy to have the camera on his face.

Back at the SoHo loft, the crew watched the same work print of *We Can't Go Home Again* that was shown at Cannes six years before. The film was screaming with technical problems, but the composite portrait of electronic colours and clashing images captivated us. The shock was seeing how Nick's health had deteriorated since the Harpur film.

Seeking to help Nick finish *We Can't Go Home Again*, Wim plays 'a German Friend'. He describes the script he has written for *Hammett*. 'What's your budget?' Nick asks. 'Ten million dollars,' Nick: 'For one per cent of that I could make ... lightning over water.'

Despite severe pain in the abdomen and back, Nick summoned the strength to act. Losing his battle with cancer, he asked his son Tim, a cameraman, to fly in from Los Angeles to film his father for the movie. Nicholas Ray made his last public appearance at the Museum of



Ray directing *'We Can't Go Home Again'*, 1971. Photograph: Charles Levi.

Modern Art between screenings of *They Live By Night* and *On Dangerous Ground*. We lifted him on stage in a wheelchair. Six weeks later he died. Wim filmed Nick's dream of sailing in a Chinese junk that would take him to the Orient in search of a ginseng cure for cancer. A Mitchell camera was mounted on deck, panning round and round by itself. A Moviola was fastened on deck with reels of celluloid strip flapping in the wind. Nick's ghost sailed out to sea.

Nick once told me that he wanted to invent a black light. I asked him: 'Nick, why the hell would you want to invent a black light?' He said: 'So I can shoot night scenes in the daytime.' Nick Ray was an angry old man with many contradictions. He hated the forces of repression with a passion, but he also possessed the seeds of his own destruction. He took a blind run and saw a black light. □